

4 October 2016		ITEM: 8
Corporate Parenting Committee		
Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report 2015-16		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: None Key	
Report of: Neale Laurie - Service Manager Safeguarding and Child Protection		
Accountable Head of Service: Andrew Carter – Head of Children’s Social Care		
Accountable Director: Rory Patterson – Director of Children’s Services		
This report is: Public		

Executive Summary:

This report is the annual summary of activity undertaken by the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) 2015-16 who provide Independent Scrutiny of the Department’s care plans for all the Children Looked After by Thurrock Council. An Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Service for Children Looked After is required in the guidance arising from the Adoption and Children Act 2002 section 118 which amended Section 26 of the Children Act 1989. To provide information on the role of the Independent Review Officers and update on the Statutory Review Services activity for Children Looked After.

1. Recommendation

1.1 The role of the Independent Reviewing Officers is a statutory responsibility and therefore it is recommended that The Corporate Parenting Committee continues to monitor the activity of the IROs and request any further information it requires in its scrutiny role.

1.2 Members are asked to consider and adopt “Areas for development” contained within Section 4 of this report for continued improvement of this service.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 The Independent Review Officers’ (IRO) service is set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook, linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were introduced in April 2011. The responsibility of the IRO has changed from the management of the Review process to a wider overview of the case including regular monitoring and follow-up between

Reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of Care Planning for Children Looked After (CLA) and for challenging drift and delay.

- 2.2 Every Child Looked After should have a named IRO to provide continuity in the oversight of the case and to enable the IRO to develop a consistent relationship with the child. The child's Care Plan must be completed by the Social Worker within 10 working days of the child becoming Looked After and the IRO must be named in it. Thurrock has continued to meet this requirement during this reporting period, with most young people being allocated an IRO within 24 hours of being notified that they have come into care.
- 2.3 The IRO has two clear functions to chair the child's review and to monitor the child's case on an ongoing basis. In order to provide ongoing monitoring, the draft guidance recommended that IROs should have caseloads of approximately 50 children. Following representations from local authorities regarding resources, the final version has changed this to 50-70 cases. During this period, this has continued to be manageable, although caseloads continue to remain at the top end of the recommended allocation levels.
- 2.4 IROs must spend time with the child before each review, to prepare them for the meeting and to be satisfied that that the child has been properly consulted about any proposals for their future. IROs regularly meet and remain in contact with young people, either face to face, by phone, text or sometimes email. IROs are expected to either have the skills or access to specialist input so that they can establish the views of children with communication difficulties or complex needs. All of the IROs are highly experienced social workers, who work hard to achieve the above expectations.
- 2.5 The participation of children and young people in their reviews is good (see table at 3.12) and continues to be an area of growth ensuring the voice of the child is heard. Advocacy services are also used to ensure their voices are included. The Team in conjunction with the Children in Care Council have developed an alert card, to be used at times when a young person is worried about their safety and is unable to raise this with their carer.
- 2.6 IROs have the authority to adjourn meetings if they are not satisfied that the review has all the information necessary to make a rounded judgement about the viability of the child's Care Plan and whether any proposals are in the child's best interests. If the review is adjourned, it must be completed within 20 working days. On occasions it is necessary to hold reviews as a series of meetings, this ensures that all the parties and information is available and considered.
- 2.7 Referral by an IRO of a case to CAF/CASS (Children and Families Court Advisory Service) should no longer be seen as a last resort but can be considered at any time. Consultations have taken place, however it has not been necessary to refer a Thurrock case to CAF/CASS during this reporting period. The interface between the IROs and Guardians continues to

strengthen with joint meetings scheduled to assist with communication and relationships.

- 2.8 The team also leads on Children's Participation, monitoring and tracking all Children Looked After (CLA).
- 2.9 There is an expectation that the IRO service scrutinise the care planning and are actively taken forward with more robust tracking and challenge.
- 2.10 IROs continue to monitor cases highlighted as at risk of drift and continue use the escalation protocol, managing the greater number of escalations at the Manager level, which leads to a quicker resolution of the issue.
- 2.11 IRO's are continuing to work in partnership with the Children in Care Council.
- 2.12 An Ofsted inspection took place during this reporting period February – March 2016; they commented "The majority of reviews are timely, purposeful, well attended and well recorded. Independent reviewing Officers (IROs) are knowledgeable experienced and know the children well" (Ofsted, 23 May 2016).

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1 The IRO team is now made up of 5 IRO Full Time posts. An additional IRO post was created and the budget was adjusted accordingly to reflect the increase in workload.
- 3.2 The core team of IRO's has remained stable during this financial year which provides good continuity for the young people in our care.
- 3.3 The team is supported by 78 hours administration. Capacity issues have been a challenge due to long-term sickness of an administrator.
- 3.4 At the end of 2015/16 there were 336 children in care. This represents a 19% (53 children) increase from the previous year. From the total number of children in care at year-end 23% (80 were recorded as Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC), there were 41 recorded as UASC, 2014/15. This increase continues to be a significant challenge to the service.
- 3.5 Of the total 825 reviews, 748 were completed on time this represents a performance of 93.3% completed on time which remains above the English and Statistical Neighbour data at 90.5% and 90.6% respectively.

3.6 Ethnic Origin of Children Looked After at 31 March 2016

White British	175
Traveller of Irish Heritage	3
Gypsy/Roma	10
Mixed white/Black Caribbean	4

Mixed white/ Asian	2
Mixed white/ African	3
Any other white background	9
Any other mixed background	11
Pakistani	1
Any other Asian background	40
Caribbean	3
Any other black background	15
Any other ethnic group	37
TOTAL :	336

The IRO's within the care plan explore issues of diversity and ensure they are addressed appropriately where necessary.

Culturally sensitive and gender appropriate placements are identified where necessary and appropriate. This is particularly relevant to the increase of unaccompanied asylum seekers. Interpreters are routinely used to identify and meet their needs both within the care planning and review process.

The Department provides a dedicated Team for young people with a disability and reviews are conducted in a manner that is sensitive to their communication methods, to enable participation where at all possible, for example, signing or picture/computer input.

Recognition of young people's ethnicity is also recognised for example the inclusion of Travellers Welfare Service for some young people

- 3.7 As the CLA population has fluctuated over the period caseloads have varied between 70 and 85. This is set against a recommended 50-70 within the IRO Handbook.
- 3.8 IROs average between 50 - 60 Reviews in any given month, a mix of first Reviews and subsequent Reviews. All Reviews are booked by the administration of Plans and Reviews this ensures that an IRO is available within timescale and also acts as the allocation process for new work.
- 3.9 IROs continue to represent the service on a number of strategies.
- 3.10 Disruptions of long term and placement breakdown and other meeting related to children in care are carried out by IROs.
- 3.11 Case load for IRO - The size of caseload alone does not indicate the workload for each IRO; this is also based on the number of Out of Borough placements, large family groups, disability, UASC, Pathway Plan reviews, Section 85(Young people in Hospital for three months plus) and Young People who are on remand.

- 3.12 There has been a steady increase in young people attending their reviews and positively participating in them. IROs have been told to actively seek the views of children who do not wish to attend their reviews and to see what would assist in getting them there. There have been a number of cases where the IRO has supported the young person in chairing their own review or setting their own agendas.

Participation	Number of Reviews
Child aged under 4 at the time of the review	178
Child physically attends and speaks for him or herself	344
Child physically attends and an advocate speaks on his or her behalf	13
Child physically attends but does not speak for him or herself, does not convey his or her view symbolically (non-verbally) and does not ask an advocate to speak for him or her	6
Child does not attend physically but briefs an advocate to speak for him or her	49
Child does not attend but conveys his or her feelings to the review by a facilitative medium	149
Child does not attend nor are his or her views conveyed to the review	81
Child physically attends but does not speak for him or herself, does convey his or her view symbolically (non-verbally) and does not ask an advocate to speak for him or her	5
Grand Total	825

- 3.13 Parents' active participation is on average of 67% of parents being involved in reviews either through attendance, completing a consultation booklet or meeting the IRO separate to the review meeting. This is a decline upon previous years and reflects the increase of unaccompanied asylum seekers.
- 3.14 Distribution of completed review Outcomes and reports remains a significant challenge and do not always meet the required timescale with around only 41% being completed within 20 working days of the review. With current resources this remains a significant pressure and was highlighted by Ofsted as an area for improvement. The service is reviewing processes which will include administrators supporting the IROs with this task to improve performance in this area. Clear improvement targets are being set.
- 3.15 Conduct of the Organisation in relation to the Review

Areas for consideration include:

- Preparation of young person/family for the review
- Preparation of Pre-Meeting Report (PMR)
- Quality of Pre-Meeting Report/Care Plan and SW presentation to the review
- Management oversight

- 3.16 IROs complete 98.5% of their first reviews in a series of meetings to ensure we meet timescale.
- 3.17 IROs continue to be mindful of the need to ensure that the Outcomes and Report are accessible to children and parents.
- 3.18 IROs continue to review the written care plans and comment on the quality in the review. The quality of care planning varies and IRO's continue to work with the Social Work Teams around expectations.
- 3.19 Dispute resolution and escalation - The department has a dispute resolution protocol.
- 3.20 The cases of concern process is in place to both record escalations to Senior Managers as well as looking at those cases resolved at a lower level between IRO/Practice Managers/ Managers.
- 3.21 In total 81 cases have been raised by IROs with the biggest majority being dealt with at SW/Team Manager level. 12 at Service Manager level and 2 at Head of Service level. The Head of Service has taken a personal over view of all missing young people including those who are looked after.
- Areas escalated have included
 - Drift and Delay including Policy and Procedures not being followed
 - Paperwork incomplete
 - Statutory duties not fulfilled (Health Assessments, Visits etc)
Education issues
 - Lack of Management oversight
 - Transition
 - Changes to care plans without the notifications to IRO
 - Quality of mental health services
 - Quality of placements
- 3.22 The challenge of Child Sexual Exploitation is particularly relevant to the role of the IRO, especially for those young people placed out of borough. IROs have been working hard with the operational staff to recognise those at risk and to ensure that risk assessments are completed and plans put in place to minimise the risk. This is an increasingly challenging aspect of the work.
- 3.23 The IRO service is represented at Children Looked After Surgeries, which is chaired by the Head Of Service. This provides further scrutiny of the care plans and challenges any drift.
- 3.24 The IRO role is not to identify the Resources needed to meet a young person's needs but to ensure that those resources utilised match the needs of the young person and are of a high quality.

- 3.25 IROs challenge when the placement fails to address the young person's needs an alert is raised and consultation is undertaken with the fostering manager to resolve the issues.
- 3.26 The processes involving fostering team is working well and has improved as has the communication between IROs and fostering through the sharing of the information.
- 3.27 The issue relating to a move from regulated to unregulated placement has been discussed and it is clear the IRO should be made aware immediately there is any suggestion that the young person's plan is such a move.
- 3.28 "Staying Put" gives young people in foster care the option of remaining in the carers' homes post 18, this enables them to continue to mature and develop independence skills with the support of the carer before choosing to live independently. IROs have taken an active role in promoting the "Staying Put" Policy where is appropriate.
- 3.29 The role of the IRO is very specific and whilst line managed through the Department it is a role which should provide challenge and scrutiny of the Council in regards to its care plans and services to individual young people. In order to maintain independence and peer support links have been established with colleagues in the Eastern Region, which also provides some level of benchmarking across the region.
- 3.30 Areas for development
- IROs to continue to be aware of the possibilities for sexual exploitation amongst Thurrock's looked after population; especially those placed out of Borough and ensure that appropriate risk assessments and actions are undertaken.

4. Reason for recommendations

- 4.1 This is a key priority for the council to identify and safeguard those young people at risk of sexual exploitation.
- 4.2 The plans and reviews service to continue to work on improving the timeliness of minutes being completed, without loss of quality. A review of the administrative support is underway.

There is an expectation that minutes and recommendations from reviews are shared in a timely manner, this ensures that the care planning is communicated effectively to all. This is identified as an area for improvement in the 2016 Ofsted Inspection report.

- 4.3 IROs continue to actively challenge the service in all areas of CLA and formally raise disputes where these matters are not resolved within a satisfactory timescale.

The Dispute Resolution Escalation Process is designed to ensure that IROs maintain their independence and challenge to the service and ensure that care plans are appropriate and adhered to for every young person in the care of Thurrock.

- 4.4 The IRO service to continue to ensure children and young people actively participate in their reviews and care planning.

The involvement of young people in the care planning process is vital to ensure the success of placements, but also provides a clear safeguarding function too.

- 4.5 IROs to be mindful of the implications of the increase of UASC in the looked after population and to ensure that the quality placements and of care planning and standards are not compromised.

IROs are essential in raising issues regarding quality of care for all young people who are looked after by the local authority, this is especially important for this specific group of young people and the additional prejudice and discrimination they could face.

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children are some of the most vulnerable young people in society. The ability to place and ensure suitable support packages are in place remains a challenge to the Council.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 5.1 Consultation has been undertaken with the Performance Team and the Children in Care Council (CICC)

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community

- 6.1 The report highlights the importance of the IRO role in ensuring that the legal duties are fulfilled by the local authority. The recommendations enhance and support corporate policies and priorities.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Kay Goodacre**
Finance Manager
Children and Adults

The additional appointment of a fulltime IRO, to meet the volume pressures has impacted upon the budget creating an overspend for 2015/16, equivalent to a full time salary. It is predicted that this post is likely to be required in the

short to medium future; therefore plans are being explored to make arrangements for a fixed-term contract to reduce agency costs.

7.2 **Legal**

Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**

Principal Solicitor Children's Safeguarding

Section 118 Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced the concept Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs). The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 extends the IRO's responsibilities from monitoring the performance by the Local Authority of their functions in relation to child's review to monitoring the performance by the Local Authority of their functions in relation to a child's case as set out in sections 25A - 25C of the Children Act 1989. The intention is that IRO's should have an effective independent oversight of the child's case and ensure that the child's interests are protected throughout the care planning process. The IRO Handbook provides clear guidance on the IRO's' role in and processes around the case review:

7.3 **Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Natalie Warren**

Community Development and Equalities Manager

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7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

None

8. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

None

9. **Appendices to the report**

None

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